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ABSTRACT

Without support, financial, organizational and otherwise, the U.S. national IEA writing study would never have been conducted; however, implementation of the study was difficult. Planning for the study and its support commenced in 1980, coterminous with two important occurrences: the National Institute of Education pulled back on its interest in funding research in the area of writing assessment at the Center for the Study of Evaluation (CSE) at UCLA and federal economic policies produced considerable shrinkage in federal and other funds available for research. CSE supported its design and planning phases. Additional support for the design of the international study and test development was provided by the University of Illinois, the International Steering Committee, and the Spencer Foundation. Since CSE already had ongoing writing assessments in a number of states, state funding was sought to continue independent programs, which were to serve as replicates. Although the state support was not found to be fully compliant with IEA requirements, public pressure concerning writing competence and lobbying by educators resulted in a large grant from the MacArthur Foundation for data collection and training for the scoring. Federal and state agencies were helpful in minimizing the data collection costs. Additional federal support was used for scoring and preliminary data analyses. Several factors were concluded to be significant: (1) professionals' commitment; (2) consideration of a variety of funding sources; (3) power of good data; (4) value of collaboration among existing networks; and (5) collaboration with states and local school districts. (GDC)

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BUILDING THE RESOURCE BASE: ECONOMIC, POLITICAL, AND PRACTICAL OPTIONS IN THE U.S. WRITTEN COMPOSITION STUDY

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Without support, financial, organizational and otherwise, the USA national IEA writing study would never have been conducted. Obviously. But while easy to say, it was somewhat more difficult to implement. UCLA's strategy for securing support for the USA national IEA study was an exercise in patience, persistence, and penury. The process started in 1980 and continues through today, a perpetual effort to assure funding for an large scale study during times of diminished research resources. The experience has provided a number of lessons in how to garner support, in the factors that contribute to success, in how to conduct research on a short shoestring, and in some of the costs as well as benefits from such a strategy. In my comments today, I'd like first describe the chronology of our experience and then to share some of the lessons we think we learned.

Chronology

Planning for the IEA study and its support commenced in 1980, coterminous with two important occurrences: NIE pulled back on its interest in funding CSE research in the area of

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writing assessment and federal economic policies produced considerable shrinkage in federal and other funds available for research. Thus, as we embarked on the IEA project, we lost the federal financial support for the very research capacity upon which the study was based and our options for pursuing other funding alternatives was somewhat constricted by the times.

Nonetheless, we proceeded on with the design and planning for the study, supported in part by UCLA discretionary funds and in part by personnel commitments and donations. During the initial stages, the conceptual framework and study design for the international study was the primary concern, involving collaboration with Alan Purves at the University of Illinois and the full participation of an International Steering Committee. Supported by the Spencer Foundation, this international collaboration produced the design and instruments to be used for the study, including the writing tasks, questionnaires for students, teachers, and principals, and scoring guides.

As these plans became more concrete, CSE's role became focused on the USA study and ways to support it. Securing funds to field and complete the study was a significant, $500,000 problem. Perhaps equally important, however, was continuing CSE's institutional capacity and presence in the area of writing assessment. Having lost federal support, we needed to find an alternate market to maintain and build our research base. Having developed a highly refined and replicable set of procedures for assessing writing as a by product of our research on writing, we found we had a product and process of great interest to local school districts and to state departments of education. Helping to

install writing assessments in such diverse places as Conejo Valley, Jurupa, Pittsburgh, California, Illinois, South Carolina, Connecticut (all principally Edys' efforts) resulted in a number of important benefits: 1.) we kept our capacity alive and our presence felt nationally; 2.) we continued to refine the training and psychometric procedures which would later well serve the national study; 3.) we were able to conduct planned variations within these very practical applications that enabled us to expand our research base; and 4.) because the resulting assessments were well regarded, and in some cases contributed demonstrably to the improvement of student performance, we were able to expand political support for the national study and to document the importance of the methodology we were proposing to implement.

This experience suggested (to Eva) another potential way to support the IEA national study: a self-supporting model in which 8-10 states would serve as replicates to compose the national sample and in which each state would support is own participation because of its inherent self interest (including interest/need to conduct state assessments in writing and the capacity building opportunities the study involved for teacher/scorers and administrators). Thus while continuing to develop more traditional funding options during the period 1982-83 (through multiple contacts with the NIE, with the National Center for Educational Statistics, to foundations such as Carnegie Corporation, the Keck Foundation, the Department of Defense, the Ford Foundation, Exxon Foundation, Weyerhauser Foundation, and

National Assessment, we (Eva) pursued negotiations with state departments in Illinois, Maryland, Hawaii, California, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Virginia. On the verge of success with this latter, self-supporting option, we were informed that this plan was not fully compliant with IEA requirements.

At this point, we were near the end of our window of opportunity. According to the IEA plan, the last date for a country to carry out its data collection was the end of 1984 and here we were in 1984. A number of auspicious circumstances then intervened. First, enormous public policy interest developed around the issue of writing. An unprecedented number of national studies of the quality and needs of American education had been conducted and released. Almost unanimously these studies concluded that writing was a significant skill related both to communication and to rational thinking and represented an important need for American students. A number of these studies also supported the need for cross-national comparisons of the type exemplified by IEA work. Secondly, and probably more importantly, a number of academic colleagues intervened personally --through personal contact with foundation friends -- to encourage funding of the study. As a result, the MacArthur foundation was willing to entertain a proposal to get the USA study off the ground. They were not willing or able to support the entire study, but they were willing to consider a $112,000 grant with the proviso that other federal money be secured to augment their contribution.

Given the methodological capability we were able to maintain and refine during the interim, the documentary base we had

accummulated, the political and public policy interest in the writing problem, and a real sense of urgency, we were able to develop a compelling and cost effective proposal for McArthur in which we could confidently proposed to field data collection and assure its return by year's end. And that principally was what MacArthur was asked to support: data collection and training for the scoring.

How were we able to launch and achieve the return rate we did in such a short time period? The support we had cultivated during the previous years played an important role. First, although NCES initially was not able to provide support, they did stand ready to help in drawing a national probability sample, a process that used their data base and their staff time. Second, contacts with the states in this project as well as through other personal and organizational networks had produced a good relationship with the Council of Chief State School Officers. Through their auspices, once the sample was drawn, we were able to solicit letters from the appropriate Chief to the district and schools drawn in the sample to encourage their participation. The letters added power to our requests for participation and probably contributed greatly to our return rate. From the teacher side too, we benefited from active support from the NEA. And from the practical side, it should be mentioned, we were offering teachers and schools something of real use, beyond the abstract value of contributing to research: a way to organize and look at their instructional programs in writing and data on how their students were performing relative to the nation and to the

international community.

With good data in hand, but not quite enough money to complete the scoring, combined with continuing policy interest in writing at the highest levels and personal contacts, we were able to obtain in 1985 an increment from NIE/NCES. Committment from NIE and NCES management and program staff created this opportunity. The NCES funds enabled us to complete scoring on a sample students and classrooms across all tasks (scoring about 1/2 the essays collected) and to do preliminary analyses. Preliminary scoring was completed during the summer of 1985, followed by the preliminary analyses which Eva will address.

And the search goes on. While we still have a small amount of funds remaining to do additional analyses, we still lack the money to examine the school context and process data collected during the study and to examine relationships among and between context, process, and outcomes. We are seeking once more additional "modest allocation(s)" to transform prior investments into even greater contributions -- to provide a national portrait of students' writing in this country, to understand the nature of writing instruction as it currently exists, and to provide direction for future improvements in practice and policy. We are optimistic about our probabilities for success (and entertain some possibility of being included as a line item in the federal budget).

Lessons Learned

What have we learned from our experiences? Let me summarize briefly:

1. The importance of individual commitment and professionalism. My colleagues were willing to donate their time and effort to push forward the USA study --in the absence of any support, and on top of many other responsibilities. Because they were willing to start and continue the study without funds assured, we later were able to mount a valid argument about the relatively modest funds that were required to complete various aspects of a major national study.

2. The usefulness of considering various funding options. Initially, and to no avail, we sought the sizeable grant that would enable us to complete the entire study. The self-supporting model using state assessment programs offers an interesting option for other research studies even though it did not meet IEA needs. The incremental approach that was ultimately used shows promise for funding other large projects, particularly when some funders are interested but not able to commit the total necessary. An incremental approach enables you to argue convincingly that for just a little more, the great value of prior investments can be realized.

3. The power of good data. Related to point 2, having solicited a modest amount of funds and having actually collected the data, our sound sampling and good return rates acted as an impetus to new funding. Rather than trying the stretch available resources, we fully committed the necessary funds to assure a compelling data base for future funding. Short term economies might have had significant long term costs.

4. The value of existing networks and the importance of collaboration between researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to promote mutual goals. Being able to draw on the support of the Chiefs provided important moral, political and organization support for the study -- both for funding and for implementing the study.

5. The importance of collaborative efforts with states and locals. Bringing the results of research to practice at the state and local levels represents not only a value in itself but a strategy for maintaining institutional capacity and expanding the research base. Particularly in times of reduced federal support for educational research, we need to forge new partnerships and to explore new creative mechanisms for serving mutual needs. Such endeavors can provide important political support for research as well as a means for funding it.